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 **"Daddy, Talk!": Thoughts on Reading Early Picture Books**

David Pritchard

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"Daddy, Talk!"**  
**Thoughts on Reading Early Picture Books**

*David Pritchard (bio)*

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For all my eagerness to begin reading to my newborn daughter, and for

all the expectations I brought to the event, I find I can't remember the first book we read together, or for that matter the first dozen or two. Many of the books we spent so much time with during those early months of reading have long since disappeared. Others have gone back to the library or simply found their way to the trash. While some were certainly more appealing than others—more lovingly drawn, more thoughtfully designed—in actual practice there was little to set them apart from each other. Most anything to do with pictures and pages, particularly if they were cardboard, would answer.

What I do remember of those early picture books is the awkwardness and disappointment with which I first took them up, and a certain doubt as to just what I thought I was doing. Gathering my floppy little three-month-old onto my lap, thumbing through the stiff, usually wordless pages, I realized that my anticipation of this magic moment was all wrong. I'd been imagining something that clearly lay years ahead of us, something dreamy and intimate, faraway and enchanted—not this cartoon parade of doggies and kitties, shoes and umbrellas, hippos and spoons and bananas that I suddenly found facing me on the page.

How did one read such things, anyway? How did one get from these barnyard catalogues, these wild-animal alphabets, to the wondrous bedtime storybooks I remembered so fondly from my childhood? And wasn't it presumptuous of me to expect an infant, who barely knew where she left off and the world began, to be interested in some little white squares with lines and colors all over them? If it was amusement we wanted, there were blocks and balls and squeeze toys scattered throughout the apartment. If it was edification, an introduction to the world, why not sit down with the real thing on our lap—a hat, a fork, or one of our cats, assuming we could drag one of our cats out of hiding?

But of course we did read them, Kate's mom and me, and if initially they were little more than excuses to sit with Kate in our arms between naptimes, books were soon enough one of our liveliest pleasures, a part of our day together that, unlike any toy, grew along with us, keeping pace **[End Page 64]** with all the changes of those first two years. And

now that we've left them behind, along with the backpack and diaper pail and stroller that seemed such permanent fixtures in our daily life, I look back on these first-word or early picture books as something much more than the mere forerunners of enchantment I had originally assumed them to be.

Curiously enough, it is not the pictures that come first to mind, but rather what one might call the picture-book voice. I might never have thought of this as a "voice" at all, in the same league with the magical story voice I'd felt cheated out of when I first sat down with these books, if it weren't for a happy misstatement on Kate's part, long after I had forgotten to wonder why it was we were bothering to study all those xylophones, yaks, and zebras. Almost two, and soon to put first-word books aside, Kate had taken to bossing us around the apartment with her newfound powers of language: "Daddy, walk!" she would order, or "Mommy, sit!," and a variety of similar commands which for a time made up our daily paces. But when she crawled into our lap with a book it was never "Daddy, read!"—though that was the word we'd always used ourselves—but rather "Daddy, talk!," or, with a subsequent leap of grammar, "Talk it!"

Well, of course. What I had persisted in thinking of as reading was simply talking about pictures, or more often than not talking *for* them, bringing them alive. Unlike the soothing lullabies and sing-song nursery rhymes that made up...

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